

Iraq War Takes Toll on Army Marriages

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NEW YORK - While U.S. casualties steadily mount in [Iraq](#), another toll is rising rapidly on the home front: The [Army's](#) divorce rate has soared in the past three years, most notably for officers, as longer and more frequent war zone deployments place extra strain on couples.

"We've seen nothing like this before," said Col. Glen Bloomstrom, a chaplain who oversees family-support programs. "It indicates the amount of stress on couples, on families, as the Army conducts the global war on terrorism."

Between 2001 and 2004, divorces among active-duty Army officers and enlisted personnel nearly doubled, from 5,658 to 10,477, even though total troop strength remained stable. In 2002, the divorce rate among married officers was 1.9 percent - 1,060 divorces out of 54,542 marriages; by 2004, the rate had tripled to 6 percent, with 3,325 divorces out of 55,550 marriages.

There's no comparable system for tracking the national divorce rate, though according to the Centers for Disease Control, 43 percent of all first marriages end in divorce within 10 years.

With divorce rates that have risen more sharply than other service branches, the Army has broadened its efforts to help - offering confidential counseling hot lines, support groups for spouses, weekend couples' retreats, even advice to single soldiers on how to pick partners wisely. Bloomstrom says he wants all 2,400 of the Army's chaplains to be available for marriage-support work.

Staff Sgt. Allen Owens, a 15-year Army veteran, and his wife, Linda, praised a recent marriage retreat that they and 20 other couples from Fort Campbell, Ky., participated in with their chaplain at a hotel in Nashville, Tenn.

Owens was part of a 101st Airborne Division unit that advanced into Baghdad in the early phases of the Iraq war, and he expects at least one more stint in Iraq. That would again leave his wife alone with their four children. The weekend retreat, he said, offered a chance to "decompress and do an in-depth study of your relationship and your personalities."

"Even if there's nothing going wrong," Linda Owens said, "it's a great way to learn about your spouse."

While some of the Army's programs aim to prepare couples for their first deployment-related separation, others try to help couples with the often-difficult adjustments when a spouse returns from combat-zone duty to a mate who has been shouldering extra responsibilities at home.

"Our hope is to change the culture," Bloomstrom said. "Initially there's a stigma about any program to do with relationships. We need to teach that there's nothing wrong with preventive maintenance for marriage."

Martha Rudd, an Army spokeswoman, attributed the recent surge in divorces to the stress and uncertainty caused by a stepped-up deployment cycle.

"An awful lot of people are going back to Iraq for a second tour - that must be hard to take," she said. "You can get through one tour, but then you think, 'Please, no more.'"

Bloomstrom said the high divorce rate among officers was no surprise because they bear the brunt of implementing major changes in Army operations, often working 18 or more hours a day.

"Every aspect of the Army is changing," he said. "We've got some very loyal, dedicated military professionals stepping up to the plate, sometimes to the detriment of their families."

Sylvia Kidd, director of family programs for the private Association of the U.S. Army, urges military couples to seek help when needed but fears many spouses are too isolated.

"So many of these couples are very young - they tend to get married just before deployment, and then the wife is here alone and doesn't know what to do with herself," Kidd said. "The people who need support the most are the least likely to go get it."

For those troops who do divorced, military breakups can pose unique legal and logistical challenges, especially when one spouse is deployed overseas.

Mark Sullivan, a former Army lawyer who now practices privately in Raleigh, N.C., says soldiers in often-deployed units may have trouble winning child custody and - when posted abroad - arranging visits from their children. In one recent case, Sullivan has represented a Tennessee father whose ex-wife is now seeking custody of their daughter because the man's National Guard unit was sent overseas.

Kidd said the divorce problem could get even worse, as long the campaigns in Iraq, [Afghanistan](#) and elsewhere require frequent deployments.

"All kinds of couples have problems, but they don't necessarily break up," Kidd said. "When you add the additional stress of these separations, it's the straw that breaks the camel's back."